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## CURRENT SUPPORT BRIEF

CROP PRODUCTION IN COMMUNIST CHINA IN 1959

OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND REPORTS

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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CROP PRODUCTION IN COMMUNIST CHINA IN 1959

Agriculture in Communist China in 1959 was afflicted by widespread extremes of weather. Tan Chen-lin, a leading party spokesman on agriculture, in a speech in late October listed a "series of serious natural calamities" including a drought, centered in Hupeh, which had "no parallel in the last 70 years," spring rains in Kwangtung, the "heaviest in the past several decades," floods north of Peiping, the "biggest in the past dozen years"; "devastating" typhoons in the Foochow-Amoy area; and insect pests, "more damaging than in previous years." 1/ Yet, despite this array of misfortunes, Li Fu-chun, Chairman of the State Planning Commission, claimed in a Red Flag article reviewing economic accomplishments in 1959 that grain, cotton, oil-bearing crops, flax, tea, tobacco, sugar-cane and beets, silk, fruit, vegetables, medicinal herbs and sundry crops "all greatly increased without exception over production in 1958." 2/ More specifically, a 21 January 1960 Chinese communique on economic developments in 1959 placed the grain, cotton and soybean production in 1959 at 270 million tons, 2.41 million tons, and 11.5 million tons respectively. 3/ Such claims give substance to an observation of the Hong Kong Consulate General that 1959 has been "another year of bogus grain output claims, thus floating the analyst one year further out on a sea of statistical indeterminacy." 4/

Peiping's revised claim for the grain harvest in 1958 was 250 million tons. This is believed still to overstate actual achievement by some 15 percent. Preliminary analysis of the situation in 1959, when grain acreage apparently fell below the level of 1958, suggests that the grain harvest was unlikely to have exceeded 200 million tons; this is in contrast with Peiping's claim that production in 1959 reached 270 million tons. An estimate based on weather information 5/ alone would certainly be lower than 200 million tons, but uncertainty as to the effectiveness of irrigation introduces a complicating factor. It is likely that the coarse grains and sweet potatoes absorbed most of the decrease in total grain production. Climatic conditions were relatively favorable for the winter wheat crop, and it is likely that rice received preferential treatment in irrigation in drought-affected areas.

The effect of the drought on cotton production in 1959 is particularly hard to evaluate. The sown area of cotton probably remained near the 1958 level, and approximately two-thirds of this acreage lies in the drought-affected zone. Peiping claims that 60 percent of the cotton fields were provided with irrigation facilities but the effectiveness of this irrigation is unknown. Production of cotton in 1959 is tentatively estimated at 1.5 - 2.0 million tons of ginned cotton, with the lower to middle range being most likely. This compares to a claim of 2.1 million tons in the favorable year of 1958, and a 1959 claim of 2.41 million tons.

The acreage of soybeans in 1959 apparently increased slightly over 1958. This slight acreage increase coupled with the fact that the important soybean producing areas are outside the major drought-affected areas may have resulted in a production of about 10 million tons of soybeans, near the level of 1958 but 1.5 million tons less than the claim for 1959.

The acreage of peanuts probably was slightly less than in 1958 and some of the crop reportedly had a poor stand because of poor germination. Furthermore, the important peanut-producing areas are located in the drought-affected area with the result that yields almost certainly were less than in 1958. It is estimated tentatively that production of peanuts was in the range of 2.0 - 2.5 million tons as compared to a claim of 2.8 million tons in 1958 and a 9.2 percent increase in 1959.

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The production of vegetables in 1959 probably exceeded the level in 1958, as a result of the regime's emphasis on vegetable production as a means of supplementing other food crops. Particular stress was laid on planting late vegetables on crop land abandoned as a result of floods or drought. Peiping claims that vegetable output actually doubled last year.

An evaluation of the effects of the various "natural calamities" enumerated by Tan Chen-lin indicates that the summer and early autumn drought was by far the most serious. The June floods in South China, although locally severe, as in the East River area of Kwangtung Province, affected only a small proportion of the total crop area. For this reason they had comparatively little effect on the nation's total grain production--probably less than one percent. In contrast to the limited flood damage, 33.3 million hectares or almost 30 percent of the total cultivated area, were affected by drought during the spring, summer and autumn of 1959, according to Chinese Communist claims. 6/ The most serious drought conditions occurred in central China, beginning in June and lasting for more than 100 days in some areas. The lack of rainfall was accompanied by high temperatures, with resultant high evaporation and soil moisture loss. Temperatures reportedly reached as high as 118°F in Hupeh Province, the center of the drought area. 7/ Peiping's reporting of the drought has been voluminous and fairly detailed. The accounts of the areas affected and the length and severity of the drought are in general supported by independent weather information.

Much of the affected area is in valleys or lowland areas where irrigation is possible. In the "leap forward" of 1958 the Chinese Communists claimed that the irrigated area had increased by 32 million hectares in that single year, bringing the total to 66.6 million hectares. After the late August 1959 reappraisal of the 1958 claims, however, Chou En-lai admitted that only 33.3 million hectares could as yet be fully irrigated, with another 20 million hectares capable of partial irrigation. 8/

An Indian irrigation delegation to China in 1958 reported that much of the increase in irrigation had resulted from the pondage of surface water. The Indians felt that while a large number of ponds can help in flood absorption, "their irrigation capability in periods of drought is uncertain. Normally they are able to cope with dry spells of about 20 to 25 days duration." 9/ The drought lasted much longer than this in most of the affected areas. Peiping acknowledged that in the dry areas water levels were low in many water conservancy projects, small rivers were dry, and along the middle reaches of the Yangtze River, water was accessible to only 63 of the 281 sluice gates and other water diversion installations. At spots along the lower reaches of the Yangtze and Huai Rivers the water levels reportedly were the lowest ever recorded. 10/

After late August, when the regime revised production claims for 1958 and the plans for 1959, the announcements concerning the effects of the drought began to take on a more optimistic tone. It is suspected that this was due, at least in part, to Peiping's desire to say nothing but good about the communes, particularly in their role of averting natural calamities. Countless localized reports were published, even from the drought areas, claiming 10 to 30 percent increases in yields over 1958 when most areas had above normal rainfall during the important growing months. This optimism about the harvest, however, is not consistent with other actions taken by the regime in recent months. Attempts have been made to reduce state grain sales to rural and urban areas and in general to restrict the consumption of grains. The People's Daily on 21 November carried an article by the First Secretary of the party committee in Szechwan Province on how to use sweet potato leaves for a vegetable and how to consume tubers to stretch the rice supply.

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At this time it seems likely that the overall food availability in the current consumption year (1 July 1959 to 30 June 1960) will be less than in the previous year. However, the regime took early measures to control and restrict the consumption of grains and assigned a high priority to the collection and purchase of food crops. These measures contrasted sharply with the situation during and immediately following the harvest in 1958 when the confusion accompanying the commune drive and the mass campaigns of the "leap forward" completely upset harvesting and procurement operations and led to a sharp upswing in consumption. It is possible that critical shortages may appear, particularly during the latter part of the consumption year (the second quarter of 1960), but as of now it does not appear that the problems will be insurmountable.

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Analyst:

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Sources:

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